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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews the issues of identity and adjustment faced by adolescent Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. Most teenagers from all the Southeast Asian ethnic groups have adopted the dress, hairstyles, and manners of American teenagers, yet their ethnic identity remains strong and specific. This is particularly true for refugees who arrived in the United States as adolescents; they rarely make friends with American students, and have few cross-ethnic friendships with other Southeast Asians. Refugee teenagers are operating out of the following often conflicting identity systems: (1) Southeast Asian; (2) American; (3) refugee; and (4) adolescent. Refugees who migrated after the age of 11 have suffered particular stress. Despite their reputation for having positive attitudes toward education, not all Southeast Asians are excelling academically, because of both school-induced problems and discipline problems. The significant influx of Asian immigrants and refugees over the past decade has led to anti-Asian sentiments, and even acts of violence. Peer pressure on immigrant students is even greater than on the American-born, but school counselors and teachers can help. Parent involvement is also helpful, but it requires bilingual personnel. Refugee adolescents often manifest problems in typically American ways, but the underlying causes of their problems are rooted in their pre-immigration, migration, and post-migration experiences. The stress of their adjustment continues to be great long after their survival needs are met. A 10-item list of references is included. (BJV)

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Southeast Asian Adolescents: Identity and Adjustment

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by Carol Ascher

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DIGEST

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN ADOLESCENTS: IDENTITY AND ADJUSTMENT

Over the last years, the adjustment of adult refugees has tended to be evaluated by two elementary standards: economic sufficiency and proficiency in English —minimums for survival in a new land. Similarly, the adjustment of student refugees has been judged by how well they do in school and their fluency in English. Yet, refugees of all ages know that they need far more than jobs, grades, or even English to feel at home in their new country. They must be accepted and respected by the native population, and must adapt to a new culture without relinquishing the heritage that had been fundamental to their development so far.

Adolescent Refugees or Refugee Adolescents?

Most teenagers from all the Southeast Asian ethnic groups have adopted the dress, hairstyles and manners of American teenagers. Like many newcomers, they first take on the outward cultural traits of their American peers. Yet, internally, particularly among those who arrived in the United States as adolescents, the ethnic identity of Southeast Asian youth remains strong and specific: they see themselves as Hmong, Khmer, Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, or Lao. Not only do they rarely make friends with American students, but they have few cross-ethnic friendships with other Southeast Asians (Goldstein, 1985; Peters, 1988). For example, Vietnamese youth who participate in gangs do so largely among themselves (Peters, 1988; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988).

Whether refugee teenagers are considered successful Americans or problem Southeast Asians, it is important to realize that they are operating out of four identity systems that at times overlap but more often are in conflict:

- Southeast Asian
- American
- refugee
- adolescent

Adolescents who migrated after the age of 11 have suffered particular stress. This is because they simultaneously had to pass through the *developmental crisis* of "identity formation," characteristic of adolescence, and the *historical crisis* of becoming a refugee (Nidorf, 1985).

School Success

Southeast Asian students have a reputation for having positive attitudes toward education and doing extremely well academically. In reality, though, not all students are excelling, often because of school-induced problems, such as indiscriminate age-grade matching, poorly designed and staffed English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) programs, premature mainstreaming (often into low-achieving classes), and general insensitivity of the school system to their special needs (Goldstein, 1985; Peters, 1988). Coming from much more authoritarian education systems, Southeast Asian students can also sometimes see their American schools as having no behavioral limits, and so become discipline problems (Wehrly & Nelson, 1986).

Prejudice

The significant influx of Asian immigrants and refugees over the past decade has led to anti-Asian sentiments, and even acts of violence around the country (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1988). No different from their elders, white, black, and Hispanic students can be extremely intolerant of the new Southeast Asians (Peters, 1988; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Wehrly & Nelson, 1986). In some cities, name-calling and other taunting has provoked Southeast Asian students to fight back, and Vietnamese students have a high rate of school suspensions caused by self-defense in such situations (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988).

This prejudice against Southeast Asians creates a vicious cycle. When Southeast Asian students feel hostility from native teenagers, they either act out, become apathetic, or turn all the more determined to preserve their cultural identity—any of which, not surprisingly, leads to further nonacceptance (Goldstein, 1985).

The Pace of Assimilation

Peer pressure on immigrant students is even greater than on the American-born. Southeast Asian adolescents quickly take on the outward cultural traits of those around them—at the expense of their own cultural heritage. At home, these new traits often cause friction within families, who rightly want to preserve some of their own traditional heritage.

School counselors can help refugee youth slow the process of assimilation to a rate acceptable to both them and their parents. Teachers can alleviate peer pressure by working with all students to help them understand cultural differences, and by using multicultural teaching materials and methods (Yao, 1985).

Symptoms of Stress

Although school personnel have expressed a need for better clues to stress symptoms among their Southeast Asian students (Wehrly & Nelson, 1986), these adolescents often manifest problems in ways that look American: gang behavior, drugs, suicide, alienation, family conflict, poor achievement in school, the adoption of extreme dress and makeup. In addition, Southeast Asian students can show stress through depression, somatization, withdrawal, and, in

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the extreme case, psychotic symptoms (Nicassio, LaBarbera, Coburn, & Finley, 1986).

Whatever the outward manifestation, it is important to understand that the underlying causes of refugee students' problems be their particularly stressful experiences both in Asia and in this country. These experiences include:

- *pre-immigration* factors, such as their ethnicity, class status, and general cultural values;
- *migration* factors, such as their time of departure; and their escape, camp, and migration experiences; and
- *post-migration* factors, such as whether they now live with their own family, how different their new environment is from the one they were used to in Southeast Asia, and the reception of the host community (Nidorf, 1985).

Not surprisingly, Southeast Asian adolescents who emigrated with their parents, or are in foster care with other Southeast Asian families, do better in school and are much less depressed than are those adolescents placed with American families or in group homes (Porte & Tomey-Purta, 1987). School personnel should also be aware that, while refugee youth may have coped well during their initial post-settlement period, the trauma, hardship, and stress of disruption and resettlement may show up later, after the basic needs of safety, housing, jobs, and language are met (Robinson, 1985).

Parent Involvement

Involving parents in the school can help decrease the tension between the culture of the home and that of the school. Schools can also offer special sessions to acquaint parents with the school system. Unfortunately, many school projects have failed because there were no native language speakers. To be successful, parent involvement efforts must be spearheaded by bilingual personnel. So far, schools have created ties with parents through afternoon and evening ESL and high school equivalency certificate classes, parent-teacher conferences, multilingual newsletters and handbooks, and theatre trips. Because the Hmong and Lao, who have little formal education, are the least likely to be involved with English outside the ESL classroom, special efforts may often be necessary to get these parents involved. Conferences with bilingual teachers are particularly important.

Conclusion

Although Southeast Asian refugee youth may look a great deal like any American adolescent even when they show signs of stress, it is important to remember that their lives have been extremely different, and that the stress of adjustment continues to be great long after their survival needs have been met. Like all teenagers, these refugees are struggling to develop an adult identity, but those who have arrived in the U.S. during adolescence must also work through the trauma of being refugees.

—Carol Ascher

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